

## SONORAN SASQUATCH?

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Popular culture strongly identifies Western Canada and the heavily forested parts of the Pacific Northwest as the most likely abode of a large upright primate widely known as the Sasquatch. The Texas Bigfoot Research Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) non-profit research organization, has long advocated the position that such a species exists in the most remote confines of Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana, particularly the region where those states adjoin. Certainly, legends and more contemporary accounts from other parts of North America have been recorded, but reports originating south of the U.S. border are rare. While this may be considered to be a function of both language differences and a less technologically connected populace, it is probably safe to say that the Sasquatch is generally visualized as a creature of the higher latitudes.

Nevertheless, Mexican and Central American folklore does include references to creatures that compare favorably to descriptions from the Pacific Northwest of large apelike creatures. Zoologist Ivan T. Sanderson compiled one of the earliest popular commentaries on the subject of hidden hominoids in his book *Abominable Snowmen: Legend Come to Life* (1961), including descriptions of a Sasquatch-like species, the Sisemité, inhabiting the remote reaches of Mexico and Central America, including Guatemala, Columbia, Belize, Nicaragua, and Honduras.

Legends pertaining to the Sisemité predate European settlement of Latin America. This was a hair-covered mountain-dwelling primate resembling humans, but standing taller and having a much heavier build. The Sisemité supposedly walked bipedally with very long strides, threw rocks, and was said to be a creature of the night. Natives of the region widely believed that the Sisemité was capable of abducting human women. According to Eberhart (2002), variant names for the Sisemité had meanings along the lines of “spirit of the mountains” and “guardian hill spirit.”

The designation of the Sisemité as a spirit, as per the translations of some of the common names, could be seen as an indication of a paranormal or spiritual belief system as the source of the legends. However, Mark Sanborne, who researched the National Archives in Belize for information pertaining to the Sisemité and conducted interviews with Belizeans, writes that among the Kekchi’ Mayans of southern Belize, for example, the Sisemité was regarded as “a rare animal, not a supernatural being” (1992). He states that, among the Kekchi’, the Sisemité is seen as an indicator species of healthy ecosystems, with the creatures retreating as primary forest is logged.

Accounts of large bipedal apelike creatures in Mexico and Central America do not originate exclusively from indigenous sources. In his book *The Discovery of the Sasquatch: Reconciling Culture, History, and Science in the Discovery Process* (2010), John Bindernagel relates the account of an American prospector who described encountering a Sasquatch-like creature around 1920 while he was lost in Darién Province, Panama. He was camped at high altitude and said the creature approached him throughout the night from the steep forested slope above his camp. He supposedly shot and killed it near daybreak and was able to closely examine what appeared to be a huge manlike ape. The prospector said all the toes on the feet were aligned parallel to each other, as seen in humans.

If true, the account from Panama seems to be clearly indicative of a Sasquatch-like creature, but not all historical records are as apparent. The following highlighted passages were taken from

the writings of one of the Jesuit missionaries who worked in the villages of the Province of Sonora in the eighteenth century. As described by Brown in *The Grizzly in the Southwest*, eighteenth century Sonora extended “northward on the west side to the Sierra Madre from Cajeme (now Ciudad Obregon), near the California Gulf coast, to Tucson,” an ecologically diverse area of deserts, semiarid grasslands, and mountains comprising the northern portion of the modern Mexican state of Sonora and the southern portion of Arizona.

Father Ignaz Pfefferkorn (b. 1725), a German Jesuit, labored among the Pima Indians from 1756 to 1767. Following the expulsion of his Order from Spanish dominions, he penned a *Descripción de la Provincia de Sonora*, first published in German (*Beschreibung der Landschaft Sonora*) in 1795, and later translated into Spanish and English. Because of their experiences and close observations of the geography and the different people who lived in the provinces, the reports and letters of missionaries provide valuable information for historians and anthropologists. Pfefferkorn is considered an extremely reliable and creditable observer, and his writings are widely cited by historians.

While journals and reports of European (and American) explorers, surveyors, travelers, and others were often extremely detailed and trustworthy, early accounts of wildlife written by Europeans could sometimes be rather vague. For example, it was not uncommon to describe several different kinds of bears based on color. In his discussion of the animals of Sonora, Pfefferkorn wrote:

*Of the Sonora bears some have black hair, others dark grey, and the smallest number are a reddish color. These last are the most cruel and harmful, according to the statements of the herdsmen. The herdsmen who often have the opportunity on the field and in the bush to observe the natural impulses of animals tell also that the cinnamon bears eagerly go after ants. . . . Hence the Spaniards in Sonora call the reddish bear “oso hormiguero” [ant bear]. (Pfefferkorn 1949:107)*

There were, of course, only two species of bear in the Province of Sonora during the eighteenth century. The “cinnamon bear” was almost certainly the Mexican grizzly (*Ursus arctos nelsoni*), a species few people realize once existed at such southerly latitudes.

Much of Pfefferkorn’s book features information procured from indigenous tribal members. In relating descriptions of bear depredations, Pfefferkorn may have inadvertently recorded some of the earliest accounts of Sasquatch interactions with humans. It is likely that, as he noted the following Indian reports, he presumed they were talking about grizzly bear activity, as did Brown in *The Grizzly in the Southwest*. That certainly appears to be the case in the first sentence. However, it is also possible that the creature described by some of the Indians in the remainder of the passage was the Sasquatch, not the predominately diurnal grizzly bear.

Pfefferkorn wrote:

*Bears are a special menace to stock raising, for they eat many a calf, and, if no smaller prey falls into their clutches, they will attack even horses, cows, and oxen. They delight especially in eating maize as long as it is still tender and soft. Woe to the field if a hungry bear breaks into it at night. He eats as much as he can and makes off with as much as he can grasp and carry in his mighty arms. In so doing he ruins even more of the field by breaking it down and treading upon it. The inhabitants of the country assert that a bear defends himself by throwing stones when one attempts to chase him away and that a stone hurled from his paws comes with much greater force than one thrown from the hand of the strongest man. This seems the more remarkable because the bear is supposed to throw the stones backwards. (Pfefferkorn 1949: 106-107)*

Such comments may seem incongruous for a highly educated man who traveled widely and lived for years in bear country. Pfefferkorn had earlier described seeing a grizzly bear while he was on a journey. His Indian guide attempted to kill it, but the

bear, wounded by his pursuer, killed the man instead. With this kind of personal experience, it seems odd that Pfefferkorn would think (or insinuate) the same species was capable of walking bipedally so as to carry off large quantities of corn “in his mighty arms” and to be able to throw rocks more forcefully than “the hand of the strongest man.” Is it possible that Pfefferkorn, while confident in the inherent truthfulness of his Indian collaborators, secretly harbored doubts that the Indians had accurately identified the nocturnal rock throwing visitors to their cornfields?

While the supporting evidence is, admittedly, extremely limited, and the proposition speculative, I propose the possibility that Father Pfefferkorn heard some descriptions of Sasquatch observations and activity that have been credited for centuries to the grizzly bear.

#### REFERENCES

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